

THE SEISMOLOGY OF THEATRE:

Tracing the shock waves of a theatrical event in society.

By Temple Hauptfleisch

Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies

University of Stellenbosch

Introduction

The crucial role played by the audience in the cultural encounter or theatrical event has received a large amount of attention in the latter half of the 20th century. In this period we see the gradual development of a range of theoretical paradigms concerned with the sociological and socio-political function and importance of the arts. These include studies of *audience response* (often based on or linked to what has variously been called *reader response theory*, *reception theory* or *reception aesthetics* - as defined by scholars such as Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Jauss, Susan Bennet, et al), *semiotics* or *semiology* (De Saussure, Peirce, Mukarovsky, Ubersfeld, Elam, Pavis, Eco, Carlsson, et al), *communication studies*, *cultural studies* and even new approaches to *theatre history* (especially in politically turbulent countries where the theatre is seen as a record of transgressions, an instrument of change and a weapon in the struggle). Certainly we cannot today ignore the role played by an active participating audience, no matter how it is viewed or how a particular production or event is conceived, planned and executed.

Of course one assumes audiences were always an essential part of the theatre practitioner's stock in trade – the point of interface between the play and the public. Certainly Shakespeare was fully aware of the audience when he wrote his plays or talked about theatre in them, as were Molière, Stanislavsky, Brecht and Brook. Brecht is particularly outspoken about the role he assigned to audiences when directing or writing plays. (The success or failure of the various techniques employed by these masters are irrelevant here, but each one's *awareness* of the audience as a seminal element in the theatre-making process is particularly revealing in all the cases.) More prominent perhaps, and linked to the ideas of Piscator, Brecht, Meyerhold and others, have been the various political and pedagogic approaches which utilize theatre and theatrical practices as tools or weapons to actually affect and change people and society. In such cases the audience becomes the stuff the theatre is to work on (and in some cases even the "creators" of and the "actors" in the work). Such approaches including psychological practices, such as role-playing (notably Moreno's Psychodrama and Sociodrama), a plethora of educational theories and practices (see Alessandro Montessori, Paulo Freire, Peter Slade, Dorothy Heathcote, Nellie McCaslin, John O'Toole and many others), and the interactive, interventionist

political and communal work - perhaps best formulated by Augusto Boal, though there have been as many theories as there have been practitioners and followers (see Epskamp, 1989. One would have to return to the core issues raised by these theories once one began exploring the full ramifications of the interface between the theatre and its non-attendant public.)

As researchers in the field however, Martin and Sauter (1995 – as quoted by Seffrin, 2006) have suggested that there have been two relatively clearly defined and fundamental approaches to studying the role of the receiver/audience over the years. On the one hand there is the more theoretical/analytical/philosophical approach, which studies the nature of the audience as a theoretical construct (related to one or other of the many audience response theories available), and on the other hand there is the functional/empirical approach, such as audience surveys used by theatre practitioners to profile audiences and potential audiences for marketing purposes. (See for example Kamerman and Martorella's 1983 work *Performers and Performances*, in which they survey and assess the materials generated over the course of the mid 20th century). Our interest for the moment is primarily in the first category, though much of value may also be obtained from the second category, particularly as a source of data.

Most of the initial theoretical work regarding the “receiver” in the cultural communication process was done on the individual reader, listener (to a recorded musical work), or viewer of a visual art work (painting, sculpture, film and TV), since reactions to this is more easily controlled and tested than the response to a one-off, ephemeral, live event (live music or theatre). The notion of including the theatre audience (as a far more comprehensive and complex entity) in the discussion came more slowly and by a different route, but has ultimately become a serious part of any discussion of the theatrical event. (See Susan Bennet's fine summary of this process in her 1997 study, *Theatre Audiences*.)

Once taken on board however, the audience is now commonly accepted as an inevitable part of the event – and written up as such by most scholars discussing the nature of theatre, as well as more empirically minded researchers interested in audience response¹. Audiences have in fact formed a crucial part of two recent publications by the *Theatrical Event* working group of the IFTR (*Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics and Frames* 2002 and *Festivalising Culture: Theatrical Events, Politics and Festivals*, in press)

Beyond the live audience

The fundamental idea of theatre is of course that the meeting point between a person and the play is in the *event* itself - i.e. in the actual theatre space (whatever that may be) in a live, interactive and unique encounter between a performer and a live audience. It is this (live) encounter that constitutes what might be referred to as the *interface* between the play and its public in most people's minds. (There are of course a number of reactionist literary purists, for

whom the encounter is not in the live event, but in the meeting between the reader and the text. I shall return to their position later.) To many practitioners, notably some of the more prominent directors of the 20th century and thereafter, this is theatre's charm and its true nature. (Hence the notion of "reinventing" a production afresh every time.)

Yet there is also a sense in which every theatre event is (potentially at least) part of a larger memory bank of experiences, set and maintained there by social and psychological processes and "instruments" we perhaps do not understand that well yet. Indeed, it is one of the most interesting facets of the ephemeral arts - theatre being a prominent example of course - that the single event can become imbedded in cultural memory - even among the vast majority of people who have *not* seen the event or read the (entire) text (if one exists).

One type of impact is demonstrated by the fact that a vast number of people can quote at least some phrases or lines from plays which they have not actually seen or even read. Two notable examples I have come across frequently are Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be, that is the question", which people love to use. (Some individuals can actually quote more – though few can do the whole or really understand it in its original context.) However, they can apply the idea to the current situation and to themselves. A similar example is the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, where not only the words, but the physical situation is familiar to far more people than have ever seen or read the play. (How often one sees people "enact" the scene from balconies and bridges?)

Another kind of impact is displayed in cases where words and phrases have entered the general sphere to become part of the everyday language. Two prominent examples are the notion of the "Oedipus complex" and the linguistic phenomenon called a "malapropism". The roots of these two ideas lie in the words and actions of two very prominent plays, but have been appropriated into a wider sphere, while retaining something of the original situation.

A third kind of such dissemination would be memories surrounding the circumstances of production or the writer or performers. Again, I can but for the moment refer to works from the international canon of English writing, but there are bound to be many in every culture and language. One thinks for example of the reactions to the opening productions of plays such as *Hernani*, *Salome*, *Ubu Roi*, *La Ronde*, *Playboy of the Western World*, *Saved*, and *The Vagina Monologues*. These often have to do with censorship issues, while in other cases (*Hair!*, *Oh, Calcutta*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*) cult status, public scandal and/or public reaction have been the driving force - as Dawn Sova has shown (2004). Simple longevity has also played an important role in establishing a number of cultural memories (e.g. *Charley's Aunt*, *The Mouse Trap*, *The Phantom of the Opera*).

These are but a few, and somewhat facile, examples, but the point is: How does this happen? And more interestingly almost: how far and deep does this go – how far can the production of a live play reach into and impact on society? The examples I have given above obviously come from my personal impressions rather than anything substantial, and are given simply to illustrate the core problem. The fact is that we have to date had no real research in the field, for while the majority of the studies we referred to in the introductory section go a long way towards stressing the importance of (and studying the responses of) the live spectator (as *onlooker*, as *participant* and/or as *co-creator*) at the live performance, one needs but a brief scrutiny to realize that very few of them really provide us with any adequate answers to this question. Few of these theorists or researchers (even the marketing studies) seem to move beyond a study of the people who **attend** theatrical performances. Yet, the question I have asked is primarily concerned with those who people who **do not** attend theatre performances, rather than the ones who did. There are many questions one may ask about this, for example: how are *they* reached, influenced, and affected by the particular performance? More generally: how does theatre and the theatrical event impact on them, their consciousness and their lives, if it impacts on them at all?

Of course this reticence about discussing the non-attending public is understandable, for such groups are notoriously difficult to study. (How do you find them? How do you get them to agree to fill in a questionnaire about something they may not be interested in? How can you trust their answers, if the answers may expose them as ‘cultural barbarians’? etc.). For the most part one can do little more than speculate about it all, yet it is of crucial importance to have at least some idea about who these people are and what they think if one is to truly understand the role theatre plays within society. Fortunately it would seem there is a growing interest in this segment of the population from not only marketing and publicity researchers, but serious scholars of the medium. An interesting and perhaps important recent example of a study of non-theatre-goers has been the work of Rebecca Scollen and the *Talking Theatre* project in Australia. This audience development programme for regional Queensland and the Northern Territory (2004-2006) was set up to build new theatre audiences both in the short and long term for regional Queensland and the Northern Territory. Non-theatre-goers from 14 regional centres experienced live theatrical performances in their communities, and then participated in post-performance questionnaires and focus group discussions to ascertain the entertainment, cultural, and creative needs of non-theatre-goers living in regional areas (see Scollen, 2007a & 2007b). The methodology developed by Scollen may be of great importance to any attempt to pursue the arguments raised in this article further.

As many of the studies referred to in the introductory section have shown, only a small percentage of people actually attend theatre regularly, and theatre - at least in its narrower, more formal sense in which it is conventionally seen - is actually

an elitist activity in Westernized society, frequented by between 4-6% of the population in most countries, while published plays are seldom bought or borrowed from libraries. Based on these statistics, I have in the past argued that a formal theatre production or published play can seldom have a *direct* and immediate influence on society, since too few people would see it – and the small percentage group who do would be a particular and selected group of individuals, not representative of the full spectrum of the population². Yet we are often surprised to find that some works of art have in some way managed to reach far beyond the immediate audience, to ultimately have an effect on the way people think about things or how they express, view and symbolise such ideas. How does this happen?

In the work referred to above (Hauptfleisch, 1994), I address one aspect of this anomaly by arguing that despite the limitations of its direct audience, a particular production can actually have an *indirect* and often longer-term effect on the society at large, by utilising a range of processes sparked by the event itself. In the article I focus specifically on one aspect, the influence and reputation of the venue (and by extension, the celebrity status of those involved in the production) as a channels of communication and dissemination – i.e. the venue and celebrities as integral parts of the total “message” of the production. In this article I want to explore this notion “channels of dissemination” a little further.

One of the most fascinating aspect of this question is the fact that in a few cases the impact of a theatrical event can not only spread spatially (i.e. within a particular society at a particular time), but also temporally and globally, across time and space. For instance, works of art (e.g. the epic poems of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Goethe, Whitman, the plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare and Ibsen, the novels of Austen, Dickens, Marques, Coetzee, the paintings of Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Breughel, Constable, Renoir, the sculptures of Michaelangelo, Rodin) have over the ages been a crucial part of the way in which we record, describe and comment on our own human existence. In some cases such works have demonstrably influenced our ideas about history, society, science, philosophy, etc, and added words and concepts to the language we use to talk and write about such matters.

To take two simple examples: The notion of the “Oedipus Complex” is widely known and used today, yet is much more than a term picked at random by Sigmund Freud. The word has a specific meaning and the idea(s) it represents has a specific lineage that goes back to the theme and plot of a particular play, first performed many centuries ago in a particular country. Why is it known by so many people? Is it because of the play, because of Freud, or because of the many movies and novels that use the term today? How – through what channels of communication - did the word/concept make its way from a performance of a play in Athens in the 3rd century BC to us today in the 21st Century? The same kind of argument may be offered regarding the iconic figure of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and its symbolic, metaphoric, poetic, ironic and satiric employment by

artists, cartoonists, poets, novelists which we have seen in thousands of “reincarnations” over the centuries³.

However one may want to look at it, the fact is: art – and this includes theatre - can (and does) on occasion appear to have an influence beyond its physical presentation at a particular time and place. And it is this aspect of the theatrical event that interests me in this pilot exploration. How widely and deeply are the *results* of a particular meeting between the artist and the public in a theatrical event disseminated *beyond* the immediate (participating) audience? More particularly: what are the particular (non-theatrical) *channels of dissemination* whereby such knowledge gets transferred from one place, or person to the next, from one generation to the following, etc. To find this out, it seems to me one requires a relatively systematic research process and a reliable measuring instrument (or set of instruments) of some kind, in order to gauge the extent of the impact the particular cultural event has had. We are looking for something equivalent to a theatrical “seismograph” perhaps⁴.

Seismology as metaphor

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Vol. 16, p. 489) a **seismograph** is “an instrument that makes a record of the ground oscillations caused by an earthquake, explosion, or other earth-shaking phenomenon” and does so by measuring and recording **seismic waves**. The science of measuring and interpreting seismic waves is referred to as **seismology**, and the most commonly known use of it is related to the identification, classifying and prediction of earthquakes of course. However it also has a number of other uses, namely the detection of microseisms (e.g. continuing oscillations caused by storms at sea), detecting and policing nuclear tests, prospecting for metals and minerals etc. by setting off strategically placed blasts, detecting ground shocks in mines, quarries, public works etc. to prevent accidents, and by engineers for developing new structural techniques for buildings, bridges, tunnels and so on in quake-prone countries such as Japan.

Now this outline seems to me to offer a very useful metaphor for the kind of study in which a theatre researcher with an interest in the impact of theatre on society at large might engage, and would surely be seeking to measure the social vibrations or oscillations caused by a theatrical event (a cultural explosion, shift or upheaval) within a specific community or society? If so, one might profitably learn a substantial amount by pursuing the metaphor of *theatre seismology* a little further, by focusing on the *results* of a meeting between the artist and the public in a theatrical event - i.e. the point where the artistic and the public interface - and the way the play and/or its “message” are disseminated beyond the immediate (participating) audience.

The hypothesis is that - like a tremor or quake set off by the meeting of two tectonic plates or the settling of some internal chambers in the earth - the result

is a series of shock-waves that ripple upwards and outwards, much further than the immediate and obvious context. In the case of the earth's crust, this shock will be transferred outwards from the epicenter, through the body of the earth, utilizing a variety of conductors - stone, sand, water, air, etc., as well as all the fissures and cavities between them, and will carry on for as far as the strength of the original shock of impact will carry it. In similar fashion one may be able to identify some of the key conductors which allow the impact and meaning of a particular event to be carried from the theatrical "epicenter" (the point of immediate contact, the event as *interface*) to reach beyond those immediately affected (e.g. the audience) and the surrounding cultural network to the general public and to cultural memory.

In a discussion paper offered to the IFTR Theatrical Event working group ("On both sides and over the apron: Interfaces on the different levels in the Finnish Theatre System"), Finnish scholar Tiia Kurkela (2006) proposed an interesting model from the field of so-called grounded theory (taken from Strauss & Corbin 1990, 163), utilising a series of concentric circles in order to illustrate the social imbeddedness of theatrical systems. It seems to me that this concentric worlds-within-worlds model (similar to one employed by Schechner in another way in his Performance Theory and a number of theatre semioticians), may offer one a view of a world ready to be shaken by seismic shocks. So, with apologies to Strauss and Corbin, and thanks to Kurkela, I offer a Seismic Model of the Theatrical Event and its Interface with the world beyond (see **Figure 1** on the next page).

In *this* model (which relates closely to the one used by Kurkela), one may see rings 1-7 as ever narrowing contexts of potential "audiences" or receivers, from the most general, universal and international – i.e. everybody on earth (1), down those directly outside the theatre event, and indirectly but immediately affected, e.g. the general inhabitants of the town in which the theatre space is situated or the event takes place (6), the informed cultural elite of that same region, such as the avid festival goers in a town such as Grahamstown or Oudtshoorn, or (7) and the people physically present in the theatre *with the performers* as the event occurs (8). In each case there is once again an 'interface' between the performance event and the particular circle of potential receivers.

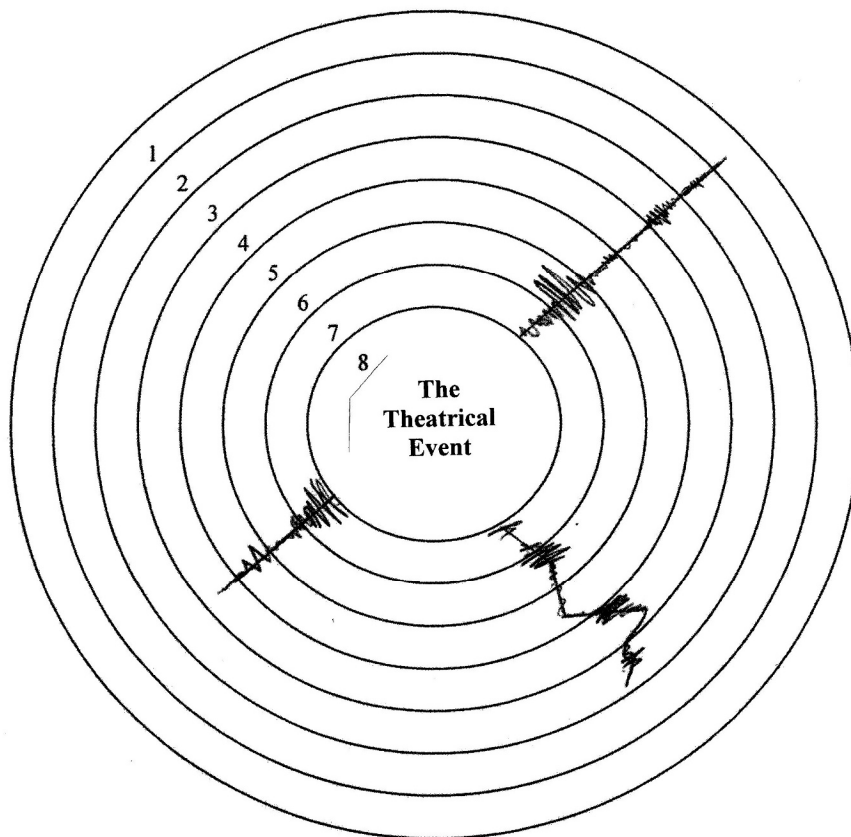
Important here is the statement Kurkela also quotes (from Strauss & Corbin 1990, 161-2), namely "Regardless of the level within which a phenomenon is located, that phenomenon will stand in conditional relationship to levels above and below it, as well as within the level itself." For it is this conditional relationship, the specific point of contact, and hence the medium of transferral for any shocks (ideas, concepts, images) from one "level" to the next.

Another important factor is that very often, representatives of all 7 the non-present "receivers" may actually be present in the theatre space at the time of the

event – i.e. be part of the level 8 interface. Such representatives could thus be one of the “fault-lines” along which a shock may move beyond the immediate and direct event, to one of the outer circles. Conversely most people actually represent more than one circle, for example theatre reviewers are not only critical but actively engaged “audience members” (circle 8), but also members of the “cultural elite” (7) and representatives the general inhabitants of the town (6).

Figure 1. A Seismic Model of the Impact of a Theatrical Event

(Adapted from Tiia Kurkela, 2006 and Strauss & Corbin 1990, 163)

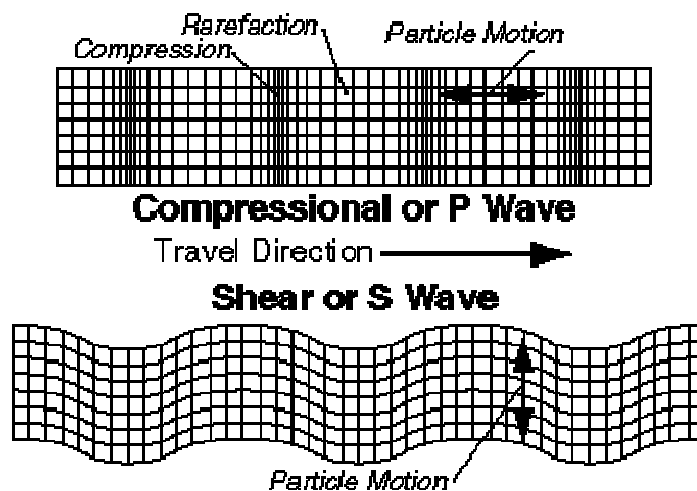


The third factor to bear in mind is an aspect of seismic waves themselves, for seismic theory states that though the waves are all rhythmic impulses, they are not all the same, differing in a variety of ways. As a result they do not move

through the earth at the same rate or in the same way, but have individual patterns, based on the way they are transmitted (on the earth's surface or through its body for example) and their speed and the impact they have is related to the material they are moving through. The mechanical properties of the rocks that seismic waves travel through quickly organize the waves into two basic types. *Compressional waves*, also known as primary or P waves, travel fastest, for they shake the ground in the direction they are propagating at speeds between 1.5 and 8 kilometers per second in the Earth's crust. *Shear waves*, also known as secondary or S waves, shake perpendicularly or **transverse** to the direction of propagation and travel more slowly, usually at 60% to 70% of the speed of P waves. (See the internet source quoted below in **Figure 2**)

Figure 2 Seismic waves

(Source: <http://www.seismo.unr.edu/ftp/pub/louie/class/100/seismic-waves.html>)



From the examples and the diagrams it is clear that the waves do not move in a regular fashion, but follow and are affected by the conductors available in the medium they are passing through. Their effect on the medium is also in part determined by the nature of the medium itself and will be greater in some areas than in others. In the case of the earth, this is where the development of the seismograph comes in: by monitoring and measuring the movement of the earth in various places, a series of graphs can be drawn to describe the kind of seismological activity taking place, identify the nature of the conductor, and to measure the size, speed and potential impact of a shock.

What does all this say to us about our initial question?

A seismology of theatre

The fundamental hypothesis here is that theatre is social activity, consisting of a complex system (or indeed a poly-system) of dynamic processes, nestled in, **and interacting with**, various layers of the broader society (itself a complex of related sub-systems). If one accepts this, then we might also argue that each theatrical event is (potentially) a shock-inducing *societal event* which sets off a series of rippling shock-waves that pass throughout the larger theatrical sub-system and beyond to the various encompassing layers of the social system (as indicated by the fissures or seismic waves drawn on the basic model in Figure 1) – and (may) cause subsidiary shocks in various parts of that larger system.

Precisely how those “seismographic” lines might run or be indicated on the theatrical model, is a point for exploration and debate at this point, where we have so little solid information. So too is the nature of the system itself and the conductors available such a (poly-)system, and the means by which one may measure the impact and effect of any disturbance or shock. (i.e. any theatrical event).

All I can do here, as a starting point, is to suggest a few of the more obvious conductors as examples of what I mean. It would then be the next phase of this project to identify and describe other such conductors, and to try to develop testing mechanisms (seismographs) with which to assess the reach and impact of a shock waves generated by a particular theatrical event.

Some conductors

There are a variety of ways in which theatrical events occur, some are more interactive and than others, seeking direct contact and interaction with audiences and communities. For the moment, however, let us only consider the straightforward play-in-production, as suggested by the various fundamental communicational or semiotic models proposed over the past few decades (See for example Elam, 1980; Hauptfleisch, 1997; and Van Maanen in Cremona *et al.*, 2004).

A core element in all these models is the complexity of the communication process between the playwright and the ultimate audience in the enclosed sphere of the venue - whose responses ultimately constitute the “meaning” of the particular event. It is this very openness and unpredictability of this whole system (what Schechner has called the “Performance” or what we have come to term the “Theatrical Event”), that makes live theatre so thrilling, and makes us return to it, time and again. More so if one considers the potential reach of some events.

It seems to me I can readily think of at least 34 possible ways in which the experience of a *particular* theatrical event may be carried way beyond the immediate experience of the actor-audience interface in a performance space to the surrounding circles of the world. I have added brief explanatory notes in

some cases – for later discussion and exploration. (There are surely far more such “conductors”, but let these suffice as examples for the moment.) In no particular order for the moment, they are:

1. **The playwright:** The playwright may tell the story of the play, talk about the theme, discuss core issues contained in the work, to friends, colleagues and journalists before production. Plays have been banned in the past on the basis of such pre-production exposure.
2. **The theme:** The theme can itself be an issue that arouses active sentiments in the public, therefore any indication that a play is being put on about such an issue – miscegenation, incest, racism, etc – causes the issue to become a point of public debate. Whether people have seen it or not, is of little concern – the point of view of the author is of less importance than the issue itself and the fact that it has been (re-) introduced into the public sphere by the theatrical event. (To take some recent examples from the movies, consider the furor about *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code*.)
3. **The (published) text:** Related to point 1, a play may be published or exposed to the public – in part or as a whole – before the performance. So a reader (who may not necessarily be a theatre-goer) has an opportunity of responding to the content of the work without being exposed to its presentation on stage. The fact that books actually travel better than live performance and are read by more people than actually go to theatre, has in some cases led to the banning of the published play but the approval of production. (Athol Fugard’s *Master Harold... and the boys* is a case in point.)
4. **The publishing system** is also an immensely powerful factor in this regard, since publishing aims and objectives play the decisive role in decisions about publication, not theatrical issues. The bottom line *may* be aesthetic values, but they would likely be reading aesthetic values, not performance values. However, they may equally well be economic values (will it sell?).
5. **The pre-publicity:** Any public discussion of the work, live, in print or in the electronic media, actually constitutes a “text” of the work, and in this sense becomes a way of exposing the public to the theme and contents of the play – and thus has the potential of eliciting a response. The interesting aspect of this of course is that the publicity “text” very often lies about the content, or at the very least tweaks it to make it more appealing, thought-provoking or enticing. So one may have a play’s pre-publicity even raising expectations and causing results not intended or even contained in the play.
6. **The publicist:** In view of the foregoing, the publicity mechanisms of a theatrical event - as an individual or as a team - constitute a potent channel for the dissemination of the core issues and ideas. Their responses to feedback from the audiences and public may seriously affect the future development and impact of the particular shock.

7. **The production company:** The fact that a company does a particular work, where it does it and with whom and for whom, is part of the meaning of the event. The image and notoriety of the company may itself be the origin of a seismic disturbance. Again, being listed as a production by such-and-such a company, may extend the life and influence of the particular event beyond its actual moment of performance.
8. **The venue:** Similarly the venue for an event may be in itself a radical element, setting off waves of joy or dissatisfaction. Festivals for example, may transfer their own notoriety to the individual events taking place in them – or vice versa of course.
9. **The Director/Producer:** As a participant (who can also talk about the writer, text, theme, characters, the event, the theme, etc later – to friends, colleagues and others). As public figure/celebrity (whose life becomes part of the ongoing narrative in the media). As a problem (any kind of difficulties experienced with the director/producer in question, would reflect on and become part of the “legend” of the event).
10. **The performer:** As a participant (who can also talk about the character, the event, the theme, etc later – to friends, colleagues and others). As public figure/celebrity (whose life becomes part of the ongoing narrative in the media). As a problem (any kind of difficulties experienced with the performer in question, would reflect on and become part of the “legend” of the event).
11. **The secondary creators:** Directors, designers, choreographers, etc. Their views and interpretations become part of the history and impact of the original event – and they too can transmit these ideas to those who were not there. (Vide the many autobiographies of writers, directors, performers, etc.)
12. **The technical staff:** As a participant (who can also talk about the character, the event, the theme, etc later – to friends, colleagues and others). As a problem (any kind of difficulties experienced with the technical person in question, would reflect on and become part of the “legend” of the event).
13. **Second and later productions:** It is the very nature of live theatre for plays to be repeated, remounted and produced again. Each new incarnation re-releases the energies of the original, not always as effectively, sometimes more so. But they may thus transfer the impact of the original beyond its original sphere.
14. **Translations:** Related to 12, the translation of a text transfers it to another context – often also affecting its meaning and impact.
15. **Adaptations:** As with 13, the adaptation of a theme or play may take it into another sphere (see radio, TV and film adaptations for instance)
16. **Intertextual referencing:** We know as much about Sophocles or Shakespeare by the way they are copied, quoted and used by other playwrights and authors, than we do by first-hand experience of performances.

17. **Rip-offs, satires, plagiarized versions, etc:** Not all of the intertextual references are benevolent or honest, but even the most devious, vicious or self-serving is a means whereby the theme and story of a specific play is carried beyond the direct experience. The fact that Shakespeare himself took Holinshed's stories, turned them into plays, which in turn were taken by others and reworked once more – only means that the original tale has (also) had an impact, that it has sent seismic waves rippling through time and society – and that Shakespeare, in this sense, was a (highly efficient) conductor to that particular seismic wave. (A wonderful example of this may be the story of *Antigone* and its various incarnations over the centuries.)
18. **The film, TV or radio version:** (See the impact for example of Baz Luhrman's *Romeo and Juliet* with Leonardo di Caprio)
19. **The box-office:** The box-office returns and attendance figures are often read as part of the play, as a judgement of success or impact. Most people know about *The Mouse Trap* quite simply because it is the longest running play in theatre history. Few have seen it. The difficulties (and cost) of getting tickets for the latest offering by Andrew Lloyd-Webber are to many people the point of contact – not the event itself.
20. **The censorship and public protest:** One of the most powerful elements in the transferal of seismic shock is public opposition to a theatrical event.
21. **The live audience member:** As we have shown, the live audience member is inherently part of the event, and takes from it impressions that are his or her own. However, once the individual leaves the theatre, he/she becomes a source of information about the event, another "text", to be communicated to others who had not been there.
22. **The critic (as live audience member):** The critic (at best) interprets and explains the work to the public. At worst the critic may misrepresent and re-interpret the event to suit his/her own ends. Many people (including many historians and theatre scholars!) rely on these reports for their knowledge of the theatre in a region or country. A critic's opinions and responses can in themselves be the cause of a seismic shock (and in this sense they too are part of the theatrical event *per se*). It is normally assumed that the critic actually sees the play, of course – though there are a number of documented instances where this has not been the case.
23. **The journalist (commentator):** This is someone who need not have attended the event, but comments on the event and its aftermath as an issue of public interest. The commentator is thus one remove away, a next level of interaction. Again, an inflammatory response, for example, can actually set off seismic waves that may travel even further than the normal circle of influence.
24. **The newspapers and electronic media:** These are obviously some of the most potent vehicles and conductors for much of the secondary impact of any event in society. The letters column alone can keep the debate about an artistic event going for weeks after the show has closed. Because it is in their interest to maintain the debate, for commercial

- reasons as much as anything else, the media is never “neutral” or objective – despite what they may claim. They, like the critics and commentators, actually help to shape the meaning and impact of any societal event – including the theatrical events.
25. **The arts and culture journals:** Similar to the other media, though they reach another audience perhaps. Part of the canonization process which, in its own way, carries the memory of an event beyond the time and place of happening. They have also in the past played a role in perpetuating debate and controversy.
 26. **The popular celebrity magazines:** They have an ancillary role to play, disseminating the truth, lies and fictions about and behind events and celebrities. Their “stories” become part of a powerful, self-driven narrative which may inform the public about a live event (see above points 9, 10 and 11).
 27. **Satiric commentaries (also cartoons):** Similarly, editorial and satiric commentaries (including political and other cartoons) may serve as after-shocks of the original eruption.
 28. **The theatre historian:** By documenting, describing and interpreting the event (often quite creatively and with some poetic license), the historian shapes and forms opinion about theatrical events which the reader may not have seen or even have heard of. Included in this category is the
 29. **The teacher:** The teacher’s version of the historian and critic’s report of an event becomes the “experience” of the new student.
 30. **The educational system:** Part of the canonizing system, this not only imparts facts and opinions about events, but often also a specific paradigmatic approach to such material.
 31. **The prescribed play:** The idea of reading and interpreting a play under the guidance of a teacher, makes the reader’s experience of the original theatrical event . By the very choice of the particular works to be studied the work and its themes are canonised and are disseminated through classrooms, seminars and the like.
 32. **Posters:** The images are read like stories or art works by people. They read into them, and it is this image that stays with them. For example, look at the impact of Toulouse Lautrec’s posters for the Folies Bergère, or Alphonse Mucha’s posters for Sarah Bernhardt (which did much to cement her almost unassailable stature as the Grande Dame of theatre).
 33. **Photographs:** The point made in 31 is even more true of studio portraits of performers and theatre and production photographs. To many a student and lover of the performing arts the production photographs in such glossy journals as *Plays and Players* or *Theater Heute* became their memories of the event. (Theatre designs actually function in a similar fashion – think of the impact of the designs by Edward Gordon Craig.)
 34. **Legal procedures and court cases:** Some events would have disappeared from memory had it not been for litigation. The cases become the public face of the ongoing debate.

Of course virtually none of these individual elements have an influence on their own – more often than not a number of them are combined and act in clusters. For example, the theme of a play (incest, inter-racial love, crudity), may alarm the moral guardians (religious leaders, teachers, bigots, whatever) in a community, who talk about it at public meetings and write about it in the local paper. This sets off a murmuring campaign, culminating in a riot, a staged walkout, and even – as has happened – violent demonstrations, leading to media coverage and finally a banning order – and a perhaps a court case. The often quoted case of the violent response to J.M Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* is a good case in point, made even more interesting perhaps because the "riots" were occasioned not by the core issues raised by the play itself, but by a peripheral issue concerning the language used by the characters. A equally well-known South African example was the strong and public response by a contingent of right-wing activists to Bobby Heaney's 198* multi-racial production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, starring the white Afrikaans actress Sandra Prinsloo and the Black actor John Kani in the key roles. In this case the moral issues raised by the play became a matter of community-wide debate and discussion. Yet, while an initial walkout was orchestrated during the première in the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, the subsequent campaign of vilification and protest directed against the actress was undertaken by people who had *not* actually seen the play. Yet this did not stop them from being prepared to talk about it and holding strong opinions about it.

Another fascinating South African example is the case of Athol Fugard's classic play *The Road to Mecca* (1984). This main stream theatrical presentation has had an enormous and diverse socio-cultural impact in the country, for it is not only one of the theatrical masterpieces of the 20th century and in many ways an important meta-artistic document in itself, but it was instrumental in the legitimization and popularising of the iconic outsider artist Helen Martins and her cement sculptures and glass-decorations, wrought an economic revival in the small Karoo town of Nieu Bethesda, boosting tourism, commerce and property prices, and led to the socio-cultural empowerment of many its inhabitants⁵.

There have been numerous such examples of this over the years, in most countries, as every theatre scholar knows. The thing is of course, the response is usually totally unique and unpredictable, tied to a time, a place and a socio-cultural context. Very seldom can any of it be precisely planned or predicted – despite the best theories and most intensive experiments of the theatre activists. The results can only really be viewed after the fact. Very much as in the case of natural disasters such as tornadoes, and earthquakes. The fact of the quake or storm may be predicted, but its precise power and path is dependent on the whimsy of nature and the topography of the land it passes through and over. And its ultimate effects on human life might depend on the complexities of human response – as surveys in the USA and Canada have just shown⁶.

Conclusion: Measuring the impact.

The secondary communication we have explored briefly above by means of some random examples, is the field of study for what I want to term the “theatre seismologist”. Given that these are examples of what might happen, the idea of a seismology of theatre implies that we must be able to measure these responses in some way, find out how they function, and how far and deep the impact has traveled. Developing the measuring instruments for this, (i.e. something like a *seismograph* or *seismometer* of theatrical impact) to give us the necessary readings, seems to require that we consider the nature of each of our conductors or channels individually, for the way in which they work may vary widely.

The next phase in this exploration would, it seems to me, be to test the outlined hypothesis by looking at and analyzing a few concrete but disparate examples from the local and world canon of theatrical events, in terms of the notions discussed above, in order to identify some of the channels of dissemination operating in each case.

This would not be easy, of course, for impact studies are a notoriously contentious area, even in the hard-core social sciences, but particularly so in something as unpredictable and esoteric as the arts. Certainly a simple survey of the non-theatre going public would not be sufficient. We would need more sophisticated theories, methods and measuring instruments than we have on hand at present. Which is of course, the challenge for our budding seismologists of the future, and possibly a point of discussion for the working group.

Notes:

1. See for example Bernard Beckerman (1970), Clifford John Williams (1971), J. L. Styan (1975), Anne Ubersfeld (1981), Martin Esslin (1976), Marco de Marinis (1982), Fernando Poyatos (1982), Herta Schmidt and Aloysius van Kesteren (1984), Herbert Blau (1987), Jill Dolan (1988), Maria Shevtsova (1989). More empirically minded researchers interested in audience response have included Baumol and Bowen (1973), C.D. Throsby and G.A. Withers (1979), Daphna Ben Chaim (1984) Ed Tan (1982), Jack Kamerman and Rosanne Martorella (1983), Wilmar Sauter (1988, 2000), Henri Schoenmakers (1992), Jaqueline Martin and Wilmar Sauter (1995), Temple Hauptfleisch (1997), John Tulloch (2001), Peter Evermans (2001), Rebecca Scollen (2007a & 2007b).
2. This argument is fully outlined in the article “The Company you Keep: Subversive Thoughts on the Impact of the Performance, the Playwright and the Performer”, first published in *New Theatre Quarterly* (1994) and later revised and expanded as a chapter in *Theatre and Society in South Africa: Reflections in a Fractured Mirror* (Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik, 1997).
3. At a popular level, see for example the website www.monalisamania.com or Jean Margat’s collection of cartoons and representations in *Le Mythe de la Joconde*, Fondation pour l’Écrit du Salon International du Livre et de la Presse, 1997.
4. Some scientists, notably in North America, use the term **seismometer** for this, but I shall use *seismograph* as the term more familiar to me. (See Wikipedia on “Seismometer”)

5. Other South African works that could be profitably studied from this perspective include Jochem van Bruggen's social realist novel-turned-play *Ampie* (1930), P.G. du Plessis's *Siener in die Suburbs* (1971), Fugard, Kani and Ntshona's *The Island* (1973), Mbongeni Ngema, Percy Mtwa and Barney Simon's *Woza Albert* (1981), Junction Avenue Theatre's *Sophiatown* (1986) and Taylor and Kentridge's *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997). These are all theatrical events which have left an almost indelible mark on the South African psyche.
6. When asked if they would heed warnings from the weather bureau about hurricanes and evacuate their homes, 65% of people said yes. This survey was done before the devastation of Katrina. After Katrina one would've expected a much stronger yes response to a new survey – but the opposite happened: the response went down to just over 40%!! It is difficult to comprehend this trend – as it is with most human responses, including their responses to audio-visual stimuli in a theatre.

Bibliography

- BECKERMAN, Bernard. 1970. *Dynamics of Drama*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- BENNETT, Susan. 1990. *Theatre Audiences. A Theory of Production and Reception*. London: Routledge.
- BOAL, Augusto. 1979. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books.
- BRYANT, Jennings and VORDERER, Peter. 2006. *Psychology of Entertainment*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.
- BURNS, Elizabeth. 1972. *Theatricality*. London: Longman.
- CHAIM, Daphna Ben. 1984. *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response*. (Theater and Dramatic Studies No 17). Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
- CREMONA, V.A., et. al 2004. *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- DELGADO, Maria M. and HERITAGE, Paul. 1996. *In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- ELAM, Keir. 1980. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Methuen.
- ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA . (1973-4) 15th edition, Vol. 16, "Seismograph" and "Seismology" pp 489-491.
- EPSKAMP, Kees P. 1989. *Theatre in Search of Social Change. The Relative significance of different theatrical approaches*. CESO Paperback No 7. The Hague: CESO.
- HAUPTFLEISCH, Temple. 1994 The Company you Keep: Subversive thoughts on the socio-political impact of the playwright and the performer. *New Theatre Quarterly* Vol XI No 44.
- HAUPTFLEISCH, Temple 1997. *Theatre and Society in South Africa: Reflections in a Fractured Mirror*. Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik.
- HINKLE, Gerald H. 1979. *Art as an Event: An Aesthetic for the Performing Arts*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America.
- HIRVELA, David P. 1990. *The Performing Arts Audience's in Perspective*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.
- HOLUB, Robert. 1984. *Reception Theory*. London: Methuen.
- HUXLEY, Michael and WITTS, Noel. 2002. *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (Second Edition). London: Routledge.
- KAMERMAN, Jack B. and MARTORELLA, Rosanne (eds). 1983. *Performers and Performances: The Social Organization of Artistic Work*. New York: Praeger.
- KURKELA, Tiia. 2006. On both sides and over the apron: Interfaces on the different levels in the Finnish Theatre System. Unpublished discussion paper: Submitted to *The Theatrical event Working Group*, IFTR World Congress, Helsinki.
- MARRANCA, Bonnie. 1996. *Ecologies of Theatre. Essays on the Century Turning*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- McQUAIL, D. 1987. *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. London: Sage Publications.
- O'TOOLE, J. and K. DONELAN. 1996. *Drama, Culture and Empowerment: The IDEA Dialogues*. Brisbane: IDEA Publications.
- SCOLLEN, Rebecca. 2007a Theatre Talks Evolve into Talking Theatre. In: Feiler, Y., Hoogland, R. and Westerling, K. (eds). *Willmar in the World: Young Scholars Exploring the Theatrical Event*. Stockholm: Stockholm University, pp. 46-58.
- SCOLLEN, Rebecca. 2007b On the record: An account of regional non-theatregoers responses to a selection of plays toured to northern Australia in 2004-2005, *Australasian Drama Studies Journal*.
- SEFFRIN, Georgia. 2006. *Emerging Trends in Contemporary Festival Practice*. (Unpublished D.Phil. thesis, read in manuscript). Queensland University of Technology.
- SOVA, Dawn. 2004. *Banned Plays. Censorship Histories of 125 Stage Plays*. New York: Checkmark Books.
- STYAN, J.L. 1975. *Drama, Stage and Audience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- TURNER, Victor. 1988. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.
- WILSON, Glenn. 1985. *The Psychology of the Performing Arts*. London: Croom Helm.

Internet sources:

- Seismic Waves - <http://www.seismo.unr.edu/ftp/pub/louie/class/100/seismic-waves.html>
- What is Seismology and what are Seismic Waves? - <http://www.geo.mtu.edu/UPSeis/waves.html>